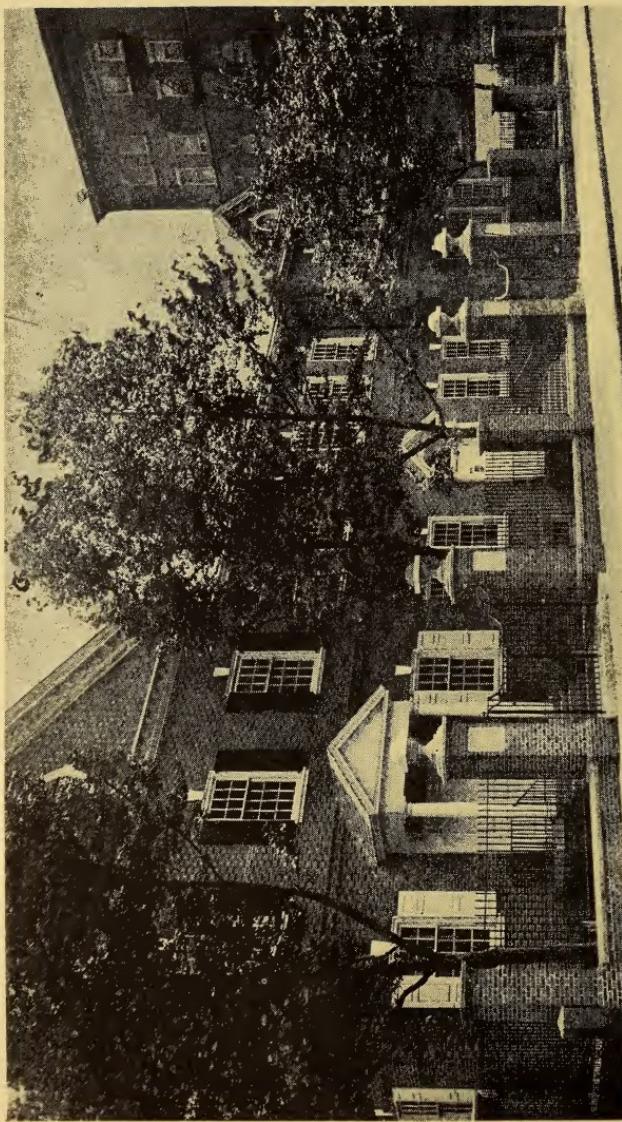


THE HISTORY OF ATLANTIC CITY FRIENDS

1856 - 1966

SARAH W. R. EWING



Present Meeting House and School. Built in 1927.

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by

Sarah W. R. Ewing

Written for the tenth anniversary of the establishing of Atlantic City Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

Gathered from original records of The Trustees for Friends Meeting House and Lots at Atlantic City; records of Atlantic City Friends Meeting; and "Memoirs and Correspondence of Eliza P. Gurney," published in 1884.

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An early court trial of 1882 between the Camden and Atlantic Land Company and an early Atlantic City Friend, Edwin Lippincott, yielded much information about the first Quakers who lived here. It tells us that Margaret Scattergood, Elisha Roberts, William Dennis and the Fothergill Sisters had established boarding houses or hotels, while John M. Whitall, Charles L. Willets, Richard Wright, and later, Eliza Gurney, were among those who built summer cottages.

John M. Whitall, a prominent Friend, and his wife were among the first Quakers to spend the summer at the shore. They built a cottage on Pennsylvania Avenue in 1856, just 110 years ago and only two years after Atlantic City was founded. The first Friends Meetings in Atlantic City were held in their home that year, and after John Whitall's death in 1877, his daughter wrote, "When we first built and occupied this cottage there was no Friends Meeting held in Atlantic City. On the first Sabbath morning our parents told us we must gather in the parlor at ten o'clock and hold a meeting there after the manner of Friends, fully believing in the promise of the Saviour that 'where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.' This promise," she adds, "was wonderfully fulfilled in these meetings for many years."

By 1862, Eliza Paul Kirkbride Gurney, widow of Joseph John Gurney, a well-known English Friend, had built a summer "cottage" on Virginia Avenue, (later the site of the Grand Union Hotel). A large, square, three-storied home with porches around three sides of the house at the first two levels, and a captain's watch on top, it was called Earlham Lodge, after her old home in England. A niece of Eliza Gurney's describes these summer-time meetings as "often crowded with a mixed company of gay, fashionable people, mingling there with simple Quakers, all appearing solemnized and impressed, both by the silent worship and the loving, powerful appeals to accept the truth as it is in Jesus."

Eliza, herself, wrote to a friend, "I can hardly tell thee what these meetings are to me, both our large parlors and the hall packed closely every First day morning and myself feeling so poor and weak to be made an instrument in feeding the multitude."

John Whitall's daughter says of Eliza Gurney that "her presence and ministry gave great additional interest to these meetings and they grew so large that the parlor could not contain the company, and seats were placed on the piazzas. The windows reaching to the floor were thrown open, and the sound of the waves dashing on the beach could be heard in the solemn

stillness of the hours. Strangers from different denominations came to these meetings from week to week, and many were comforted and fed there."

The parlor of Chalfonte Hotel, owned by Elisha and Elizabeth Roberts and built not too long before, was also opened for meetings and, as the attendance continued to grow, it became necessary to hold them in the Pennsylvania Avenue School for a time. Soon the need for a permanent home became apparent, and for two successive years these Friends petitioned Haddonfield Quarterly Meeting to authorize the building of a meeting house. Both times, the reply came, "Way does not open." Then John M. Whitall said, "We will open the way." Through the efforts of Whitall, Eliza P. Gurney, Elisha Roberts, George M. Elkinton, Charles L. Willets, Charles Rhoads, and others, ground was secured at our present location, South Carolina and Pacific Avenues. The first meeting house was built in 1872; and a picture of this one-story frame, Victorian building, facing on South Carolina Avenue, shows this date prominently placed above the entrance. This was intended for summer meetings only when it was built, for no provision was made for heat. In fact, Elisha Roberts was the only original trustee who used Atlantic City as a permanent address. All of the others were summer residents only.

Elizabeth A. Roberts of Chalfonte Hotel, a granddaughter of Elisha and Elizabeth Roberts, wrote an account of her early life in Atlantic City:

It was wonderful how the way opened for the fulfillment of the Friends Meeting House in Atlantic City. One Friend gave some land and others contributed the necessary funds to erect a modest frame building at the corner of Pacific and South Carolina Avenues. This was very close to the Chalfonte Hotel which was later moved far down North Carolina Avenue as the ocean receded. It was at that time that there were so few houses, the Light House was plainly visible from Chalfonte.

Eliza Gurney, a lovely 'plain' Friend and minister, widow of the remarkable Joseph John Gurney of England, had opened her cottage for the Meeting for several seasons. She was, of course, much interested in the new project. She had a fine team of horses and used to call at Chalfonte on her way to Meeting for my Grandmother, Elizabeth Hooton Roberts, who was rather frail in health. Many Philadelphia Friends went to Atlantic City in those days, so that the new Meeting House was justified indeed.



First Atlantic City Friends Meeting House on southeast corner of South Carolina and Pacific Avenues, facing South Carolina Avenue. Built in 1872.

The first resident minister whom I remember was Anabella Wynn who lived in Ventnor in the summers. She, too, was a 'plain' Friend and always looked immaculate. I can almost see her now. She was very tall and would remove her bonnet before rising to speak. In those days children were not asked whether they wanted to go to Meeting; they went as a matter of course.

I can also see in memory the tall gentleman who wore a silk hat and carried a cane to Meeting. He was always there and was very pleasant to us children. His name was Charles Evans. Another faithful attender was Friend Randolph. In spite of a severe impediment of speech, he often gave a short message. His faithfulness was an example to all.

In those days I think we had very few visitors who were not Friends. Today there is a real service in having so many people of other denominations come who are interested in Quakerism and want to know more about it. May this service continue and a real work of grace be developed in the years to come! Only so can we apply St. Paul's words to the Atlantic City Friends Meeting, 'Being confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you, will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ.' Philippians 1 - 6.

Since this was an Indulged Meeting, rather than a Monthly Meeting to handle the temporal affairs of the meeting, the "way" which opened was rather unusual. The ownership of the property was vested in a self-perpetuating trust, independent of any meeting, and the deed from Patrick O. Reilly to George M. Elkinton and the other Trustees, dated Fourth month 12, 1872, says:

In Trust to permit and suffer the Members of the Religious Society of Friends who may from time to time reside at or near Atlantic City to use and occupy the said lot of ground as a place whereon to build and maintain a house and its appurtenances for the purpose of Meetings for Divine Worship according to the order, doctrines and practices of the said Religious Society of Friends . . .

The Trustees have the power to appoint new Trustees as needs arise, and also to sell the meeting house, if it seems advisable. The money so obtained can be applied to the purchase of another meeting house and lot in a more convenient place in Atlantic City, or, if it seems better, the proceeds of such a sale could then be turned over to the Yearly Meeting of Friends in Philadelphia who have charge of the Boarding School at Westtown for the use of this school.

The deed is drawn to George M. Elkinton of Philadelphia, Elisha Roberts of Atlantic City, Charles L. Willits of Camden, Richard Wright of Philadelphia and Eliza P. Gurney of Burlington, who became the first Trustees for Friends' Meeting House and Lots at Atlantic City.

A petition was sent to Haddonfield Quarterly Meeting from Haddonfield Monthly Meeting as early as 1868, asking for oversight of Atlantic City Meeting. The men were amenable, but the women weren't; so it was dropped until Sixth Month 1874, when this Minute was unanimously adopted:

A Meeting for Divine Worship having been held at Atlantic City for several years during the summer season, after solid consideration, it is our judgment that it should have the sanction of this Meeting and that a joint committee of men and women Friends be appointed to visit and extend such and any attention toward it as way may open for, and report to this Meeting in the Twelfth Month next.

These dear, faithful Friends made a weekly pilgrimage to Atlantic City for ministry and oversight for many generations — not laying down this duty until after the establishment of our own Monthly Meeting in 1956.

The first report of our oversight committee in Twelth month 1874 says that meetings for Divine Worship had been held regularly between Sixth Month and Ninth Month in a spirit of solemnity which spread over the mixed company assembled.

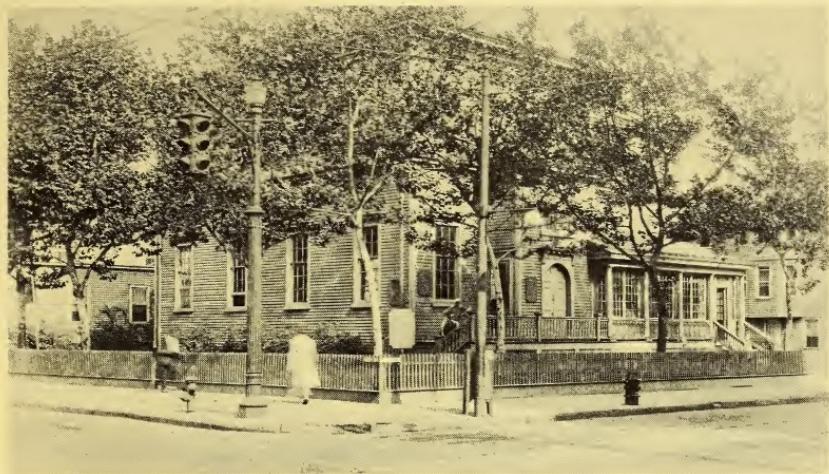
About ten years after the meeting house was built, there was a demand for all-year-round meetings, for, up until this time, meetings had been held only during the summer months. No provision for heat had been made in the meeting house, so Friends met in the parlor of the Clarendon and in a large room over Abbott's Milk Dairy for two winters. Heat was installed, and meetings have been held regularly since then.

A portion of the meeting house ground was leased to Charles A. Bartlett in 1904 who built a home, known as Bartlett Cottage for so many years. When he died in 1952, all of it reverted to the Trustees for the Atlantic City Meeting House and Lots, and soon after this, the building was torn down.

By 1900, there were enough Friends living in Atlantic City the year round to feel the need for a school, so the Educational Committee of Yearly Meeting proposed that a school be established for Friends' children and others in the meeting room. Willa Ballard became the first principal for the new school, and the experiment proved to be so successful that it soon outgrew the capacity of the place, so a small annex was added on the South Carolina Avenue side of the meeting house. Soon, this, too, proved to be insufficient, and interested Friends subscribed to enlarge the building by adding a second story. A photograph taken in August 1926, just before the present building was started, shows a large, square, two-story frame building with a glass-enclosed porch in front of the small annex, built for a school several years before.

The school continued to grow, and before long, there came a demand for more adequate school rooms. Plans were drawn for a completely new building for both the meeting and the school in 1926, and the first meeting was held in the new meeting room on June 29, 1927. While all of this was going on, Friends were invited to meet in the Ozone Room of the Hotel Dennis.

Kathryn Reese Morgan, who came to Atlantic City Friends School as principal in 1941, initiated the high school in 1943, and the first twelfth-grade class graduated just three years later, in 1945, with twelve pupils. A need was felt for more room as the high school grew, so the School Committee bought a large brick garage on the South Carolina



Atlantic City Friends Meeting House and School. Second story and annex added for the school in 1900.

Avenue side of the school grounds. This building, remodeled into a fine high school, was dedicated on May 5, 1963, and today there is a total school enrollment of about 225 pupils.

We were still an Indulged Meeting, though, under the oversight of Haddonfield Quarterly, as we had been since 1872, and a number of Friends began to feel a concern for a monthly meeting of our own. Accordingly, a letter was sent to the Haddonfield Quarterly Meeting held on Ninth month 15, 1955 at Medford, New Jersey, indicating this desire; and their answer expressed hope that we would proceed, calling upon the Quarterly Meeting when any help might be needed.

In the fall of that year, an active sewing unit was organized in our meeting, which, through the efforts of our members and school mothers, has sent many pounds of clothing to the Material Aids Center of the American Friends Service Committee.

A monthly meeting was organized the following spring, and we were officially recognized at Haddonfield Quarterly Meeting held in June 1956. Our first monthly meeting was held on July 1st of that year. Paul M. Cope was appointed Clerk; Sarah Ewing, Recording Clerk; Chester A. Ambler, Treasurer; Mark D. Ewing, Clerk of Overseers; and Henry Van Etten, Clerk of Worship and Ministry.

Before we started our second year as a monthly meeting, thirty-one Friends had transferred their memberships from former meetings, and today we have grown to fifty-two members.

It seems fitting to close our history of Atlantic City Friends with a second glimpse into the past. May Roberts Taylor, another granddaughter of Elisha and Elizabeth Roberts, tells us something of her early life at Chalfonte Hotel. She was born in the hotel and lived there until she was twelve years old.

My dear Mrs. Ewing,

Thy letter has been mislaid but I remember most of the things thee wanted to know. No, I never went to a Friends School in Atlantic City. We did attend a school of sorts for a short while. All I remember is that we had to kneel for prayers in a circle, a very strange experience for a little Quaker girl.

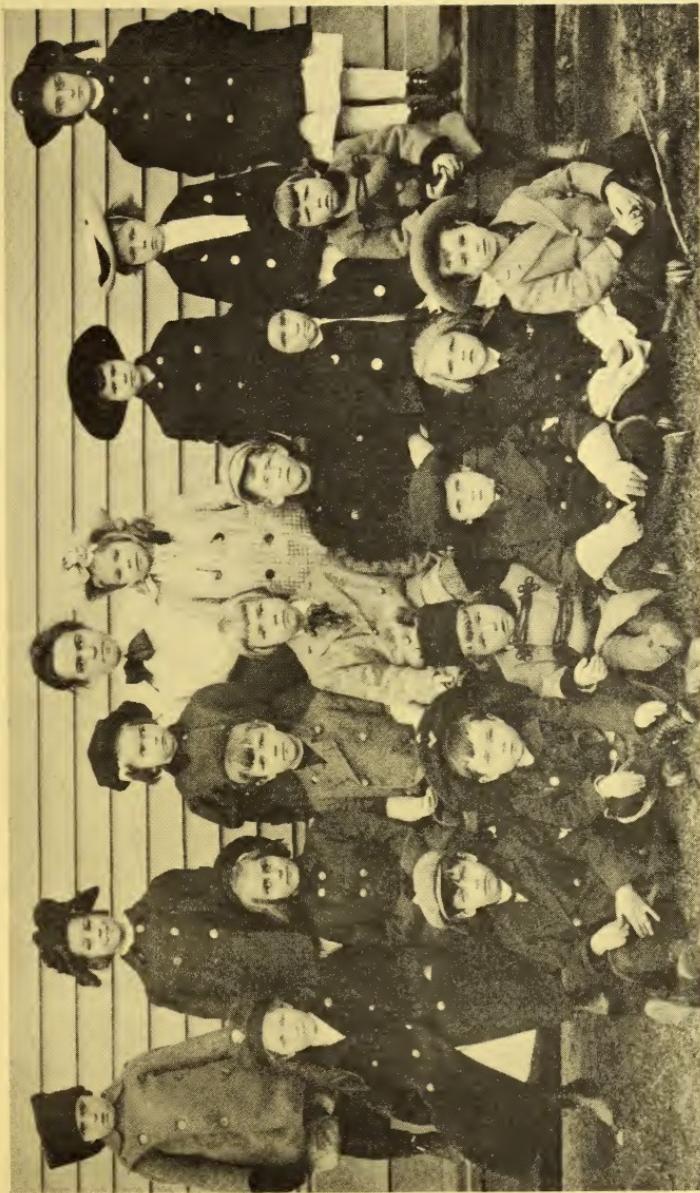
We loved the Boardwalk and I'm afraid were not always polite to people. Our heavy flannel bathing suits were unheard of in this generation. I used to ride my bicycle in the evening for the guests who watched me do fancy tricks.

We had a flood once and had a few boards for a float. We had a wonderful time between the two hotels in the street, floating up and down in our would-be boats. I felt very much at home there. We had a dreadful fire once, and all the guests threw their trunks out the windows. My brother and I were told to wait for our parents in the guest porch. I had my doll and he his iron horse, but the wind changed and all was well.

We should enjoy attending thy October meeting.

With love,

May Taylor



Nursery school, Atlantic City Friends School, circa 1906. Alice Water Cope, teacher. Among the children are Barbara Evans, Isabel Weiney Bader, Eileen Edwards, Martha Bartlett, Nora Shackelford, Helen Shoemaker, Tom and Billy Wilson, John White, Mary White, Hugh Riddle, John Lloyd, Don Riddle, Dan Bader, Aaron Shreve.

